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Can Fear Stop Animal Cruelty in Fashion Industry? The Effect of Negative Arousal in a Nonprofit Organization's Social Media Campaigns

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Keywords: Animal cruelty, ethical consumption, negative arousal, moral justification

Purpose/Rationale: In the age of transparency, nonprofit organizations have attempted to raise awareness of unethical business practices through diverse social media platforms, which has put firms under great pressure to incorporate sustainability in their operations. For instance, while People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) posted over 500 social media posts in 2016, very little actionable results came from their social media campaigns (PETA, n.d.). Their content strategy focuses on negative arousal generated by horrific visual images of animal cruelty, but many viewers and comments do little to advance sustainable practices in the fashion industry. To this end, it is challenging for nonprofit organizations to turn the audience's interest in social media into potential actions, such as donating money or signing a petition (Hou & Lampe, 2018). When it comes to fashion consumption, a significant gap is found between consumers' attitudes toward ethical consumption and their actual behavior (Moraes, Carrigan, & Szmigin, 2012). Therefore, a question is raised regarding how to design a nonprofit organization's social media campaign in order to motivate viewers to support and engage in the presented issue. This study focuses on the issue of animal cruelty which is a relatively under-investigated topic in the fashion industry (Molderez & De Landtsheer, 2015) and aims to investigate how different levels of animal cruelty depicted in nonprofit organizations' ethical consumption campaigns translate into viewers' negative emotions and lead to supportive behavior and ethical consumption intention.

Conceptual Framework/Hypotheses Development: Visual attention evokes emotional arousal, which facilitates mental and emotional processing (Geise & Baden, 2015; Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & de Vreese, 2015). In particular, negative images are found to be more effective than positive images in CSR campaigns in terms of their impact on outcome variables evoking viewers' prevention motivation (Chung & Lee, 2017). For example, a previous study discovered that an image of a stigmatized individual attracts a viewer's involuntary attention (Geise & Baden, 2015). In this case, a negative image of the stigmatized victim stimulates a perceiver's real-world memory and arouses the same emotional responses such as sympathy, fear and anger, which encourages the perceiver to take action to challenge the presented issue (Powell et al., 2015). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H1: A higher level of animal cruelty in presented images will generate a higher level of (a) intention of supportive behavior and (b) ethical consumption intention.

H2: Negative arousal will mediate the effect of perceived animal cruelty on (a) an intention of supportive behavior and (b) ethical consumption intention.

Geise and Baden (2015) suggested that when an image is presented, perceivers decode selectively identified visual elements, relate their initial interpretation of the picture to their prior knowledge and determine the salience of the meaning. Furthermore, based on moral disengagement theory that elucidates a mechanism of individuals' selective activation and disengagement of self-sanction of inhumane conduct in a particular context (Bandura, 2002), this hypothesizes that:

H3: The direct effect of perceived animal cruelty on an intention of supportive behavior will be less for those high in justification for unethical consumption.

H4: The direct effect of perceived animal cruelty on an intention of ethical consumption intention will be less for those high in justification for unethical consumption.

Research Design/Procedure: College students ($n=98$) from a Southeastern University were recruited and randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions that presented three images of animals or part of animal bodies as Facebook posts from a fictitious nonprofit organization: non-threatening condition ($n=26$), low-level of threatening condition ($n=27$) and high-level of threatening condition ($n=29$). A pre-test of 11 faculty and graduate students identified the images used in each condition. In the main study, participants were asked to assess the degree of justification of unethical consumption such as (a) reality of economic development, (b) government dependency and (c) economic rationalization (adapted from d'Astous & Legendre, 2009) prior to being exposed to experimental stimuli. After exposure to the stimuli, participants assessed the degree of negative arousal, intention of supportive behavior and ethical consumption intention. All items were measured on 7-point Likert scales with anchors 1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree.

Results: A manipulation check confirmed that different levels of threatening conditions for animals were perceived in each condition as intended ($F=37.79$, $p<.001$). The results of one-way ANOVA revealed no significant direct effect of perceived levels of threatening neither on (a) intention of supportive behavior ($b=.29$, $p>.10$) nor on (b) ethical consumption ($b=.11$, $p>.10$) at 95% confidence level, thus rejecting H1. The indirect effect was tested using a bootstrap estimation approach with 5,000 samples, and the results indicated that negative arousal fully mediates the effect of perceived animal cruelty on intention of supportive behavior ($b=1.10$, $SE=.26$, 95% CI = .62, 1.60), but no mediation effect on ethical consumption intention ($b=.58$, $SE=.38$, 95% CI = -.15, 1.35), thus supporting H2(a) and rejecting H2(b). The results of a bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval (CI) using Hayes's moderated mediation model #5 revealed that the direct effect of perceived animal cruelty on supportive behavior intention was less for participants with high level of economic rationalization ($b=-1.93$, $p<.01$, 95% CI = -3.3194, -.5429), partially supporting H3. No interaction effect of perceived animal cruelty and justification of unethical consumption on ethical consumption intention was found, thus rejecting H4.

Discussion: Findings of this study contribute to the literature by advancing the current understanding of the role of emotional visuals in ethical consumption campaigns. Furthermore, the result of moderation analysis illustrates a reason for a potential failure of nonprofit organizations' communicative intention in ethical consumption campaigns. The future research

is encouraged to investigate the joint effect of visual stimuli and textual information in ethical consumption campaigns on consumer engagement intention.

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